# Filling the Gaps: Hermeneutical Resistance Against Street Harassment

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Discipline
Philosophy

Keywords
Hermeneutical Injustice / Hermeneutical Resistance / Street Harassment / Sexism / Racism

Doi
doi.org/10.61299/aS1408rekvl

## Abstract

This essay explores hermeneutical resistance against street harassment. Street harassment is among those significant harms that impact the lives of many women in urban areas worldwide. I employ the framework of hermeneutical injustice to examine how women resist hegemonic interpretations of street harassment that obscure its normative properties. I argue that the dominant understanding of street harassment trivialises its harm and neglects its racial dimension. In turn, I explore various acts of hermeneutical resistance by women who have worked to make this harm intelligible in its manifestation as both a gendered and a racialised harm. In particular, I highlight #YouOkSis as an online act of hermeneutical resistance that theorises the meaning of street harassment on the intersection of race and gender. Through hermeneutical resistance, women protest how street harassment is understood and legitimised and, in doing so, reclaim their right to the public space.

**Introduction**

A significant part of the lives of many people unfolds in cities. As such, urban spaces constitute a societal unit that influences many aspects of our lived experiences. However, by design, cities are not neutral spaces. Instead, they are shaped by, and reflective of, social power relations present in society at large (Jarvis 2014). This realises that the urban operates as a site where systems of power are continuously enacted, shaping perceptions on who belongs and who does not. Among such manifestations of power is street harassment, a significant harm that impacts the lives of many women worldwide. In the Netherlands alone, two in three women between the age of 12 and 25 report having experienced street harassment (CBS 2022). Internationally, this number may be significantly higher. In 2015, a survey across forty-two cities on various continents found that 84% of women experienced harassment before reaching adulthood (Livingston 2015).

Fortunately, this type of harassment has received momentum in the last two decades, sparking anti-harassment initiatives to improve the safety of women in the public space.[1] In this essay, I focus on the epistemic aspect of this resistance. Taking street harassment as a key example, I explore the various ways in which women engage in narrating practices that challenge the hegemonic white and patriarchal epistemic frameworks through which life in the city is understood. By sharing experiences of street harassment, women not only protest the explicit harm of being harassed in the public space but also protest how street harassment is understood and legitimised, in turn shaping the meaning of street harassment in the broader epistemic framework.

In this essay, I employ the hermeneutical injustice framework to set out how women resist hegemonic interpretations of street harassment that obscure its normative properties. While the hermeneutical injustice literature offers substantial work on sexual harassment, which is a canonical example of hermeneutical injustice following Fricker's analysis of the harassment of Carmita Wood, the topic of street harassment remains underdeveloped (2007). This is in line with broader academic attention for gender violence, in which street harassment is often subdued in the issue of sexual harassment (Logan 2015). While sexual harassment rightly commands significant scholarly interest, treating street harassment as a mere subset of sexual harassment risks overlooking the particular spatial nature of street harassment that is central to the experiences of women who live it.

This essay adds to the literature by offering normative scrutiny of street harassment through the lens of hermeneutical injustice, with a particular

focus on women's acts of hermeneutical resistance. In this essay, I argue that hegemonic systems of meaning promote a skewed interpretation of street harassment that trivialises its harm and limits intersectional understanding. In turn, I explore acts of hermeneutical resistance by women who have worked to make this harm intelligible in its manifestations as both a gendered and a racialised harm. The examples analysed in this essay focus on an Anglophone context and draw primarily from anti-harassment initiatives of United States-based communities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that women all over the world are engaging in initiatives to challenge street harassment. Take, for instance, Blank Noise in India. Founded by Jasmeen Patheja, Blank Noise is fighting street harassment and victim-blaming in India since 2003. Similarly, HarassMap offers victims of street harassment in Egypt a platform for sharing testimonies on an interactive map. These are but two examples of the many acts of resistance that are currently working to address street harassment globally. Together, these initiatives reinterpret street harassment and empower women to reclaim the public space.

This essay proceeds as follows. First, I focus on street harassment as a harm particular to urban life. Second, I employ the hermeneutical injustice framework to explore the interpretative challenge that victims of street harassment may face. Third, I argue that despite improved language for expressing street harassment, dominant interpretations of street harassment remain shaped by hegemonic frameworks that centre whiteness. Finally, I explore #YouOkSis as an act of hermeneutical resistance against the white-centred epistemic framework of the street harassment discourse.

**A Spatial Manifestation of Power Relations**

The term street harassment is an umbrella term referring to various types of public harassment on the spectrum of gender-based violence. While definitions of street harassment differ, it is commonly understood as a type of gender-based public sexual harassment against women by male perpetrators (Fileborn & O'Neill 2023). For this study, I rely on the slightly more nuanced definition of street harassment as proposed by Holly Kearl, who defines street harassment as:

> *"Unwanted comments, gestures, and actions forced on a stranger in a public place without his or her consent that are directed at the person because of his or her actual or perceived sex, gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation." (2015, 2).*

“Street harassment is tied to imbalances of power between the victim and the harasser that result from broader oppressive systems such as patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity.”

In turn, street harassment can take on multiple forms, including verbal harassment (e.g. unsolicited sexual remarks, unwanted conversation), non-verbal harassment (e.g. honk-horning or staring) or physical harassment (e.g. touching, blocking someone's path, or assault).

As the focus of this study is women's hermeneutical resistance against street harassment, I focus on street harassment that targets women. However, it is important to note that street harassment does not always manifest as a gender-based harm and can, and in fact does, affect people of all genders.

Moreover, it is important to note that while street harassment is often sexual, street harassment is not about sexual attraction. In the words of Hawley Fogg-Davis; *"just as rape is not about sex, street harassment is not about flirtation or courtship"* (2006, 65). Instead, street harassment must be understood as a way of asserting power and dominance (Kearl 2015; Fogg-Davis 2006; Hutson & Krueger 2018). Street harassment is tied to imbalances of power between the victim and the harasser that result from broader oppressive systems such as patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity. Laura Logan (2015) has argued that street harassment is a mechanism to assert male dominance of the public space and of the bodies of women and other marginalised identities who exist in it. In this light, street harassment is a way for an aggressor to exercise a degree of power over their victims and over the public space, shaping who belongs in the urban and to whom the urban belongs.

While street harassment is not restricted to the urban arena, certain conditions of urban life allow street harassment to occur structurally. One of these conditions is simply that cities offer more opportunities for street harassment by virtue of high demographic density (Kearl 2015).

Another reason is women's relation to the public space and the centrality of this public space in urban life. Women have traditionally suffered formal and social exclusion from the public space. This exclusion is both spatial (e.g. being denied access to parliamentary galleries) and discursive (e.g. being denied the right to engage in public deliberation) (Fraser 1990). Even with formal restrictions lifted in many cultures, gendered social exclusion remains embedded in the idea of the public space as a male-dominated terrain. Women, and especially women marginalised along multiple identity axis, have a higher visibility in public spaces, which creates a vulnerability to harassment. What adds to this is the central place that public spaces inhabit in urban life. The urban fabric comes together through a network of public spaces. These public spaces (e.g. sidewalks, parks, and soccer fields) fulfil important social functions for people in urban areas

(Latham & Layton 2019). The accessibility of public spaces realises limited regulation over behaviour and a degree of anonymity, which allows public spaces to become the site of street harassment.

Another urban condition impacting street harassment is urban mobility. Many forms of street harassment require physical proximity of the harasser to the victim, where the harasser can enjoy a degree of anonymity. In this regard, the city offers many sites of transit where proximity occurs daily. For instance, many reports of street harassment attest to victims being on buses, subways, or trains (Hutson & Krueger 2019). In addition to sites of public transportation, street harassment often occurs in highly walkable areas (ELSherief & Belding 2015), where harassers may follow their victim throughout the city (Hutson & Krueger 2019).

It follows that while street harassment does not only occur in cities, certain conditions of urban life allow street harassment to occur regularly. In turn, the city becomes the background against which this harm impacts the lives of many women.

**The Harm without a Name**

In the introduction of her influential book about street harassment, Holly Kearl expresses a tension between her experience with harassment in public spaces and the socially dominant meaning of that experience. She writes:

> *"Growing up, I rarely talked about street harassment with anyone. I did not even know the term. Like many young women, I had been told by family members, friends, and society in general that this behaviour was "a compliment." I did not see my experiences in the larger context of women's inequality in society or piece together how many of us can't go about our daily lives without men objectifying, insulting, or threatening us. I didn't realize that so many of us restrict our access to public spaces in an attempt to stay safe and free from harassment". (2010, xx).*

The tension described here shows a dissonance between the normative significance of experiencing street harassment and the resources available for interpretation. Here, the concept *compliment* does not seem fitting as it does not adequately express Kearl's experience as harmful. This dissonance thus seems to stem from a particular inability to express the experience of street harassment in a way that makes sense to her: not as a trivial remark

or a compliment but as a serious harm that structurally impacts the safety of women in public spaces.

What is lacking in these available interpretative resources is the normative judgement that street harassment is wrong. As a result, an interlocutor is impaired in linguistically expressing the harm done to her. This is what Miranda Fricker has called a 'hermeneutical injustice' (2007). Hermeneutical injustice is among the two paradigm cases of 'epistemic injustice' that Fricker identified in the context of hegemonic speech. 2 Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a person has *"some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization"* (Fricker 2007, 158). This impairment results from unfair access and contribution of marginalised knowers to the collective interpretive resources, which are biased towards the interpretation of those situated in a position of privilege. This encourages a skewed interpretation of reality, for instance, when *sexual harassment* is described as *flirting* (Fricker 2007), or when, in the case of Kearl, *street harassment* is described as a *compliment*.

The upshot of such bias in the available interpretative resources is that marginalised knowers are impaired in expressing reality in a meaningful way. In turn, harms that are obscured through hermeneutical injustice risk going uncontested. To protest street harassment and consequently have that speech act recognised as an act of protest, a normatively fitting concept referring to street harassment has to be accessible to an interlocutor and be accepted by society as a recognised interpretative resource.

Importantly, marginalised knowers engage in various acts of shaping and sharing meanings to challenge this interpretative bias. This type of resistance has been defined by José Medina as 'hermeneutical resistance', referring to *"the phenomenon in which a dissident voice rebels against mainstream voices"* (2012, 209). This type of interpretative action overcomes communicative disablement by bringing obscured experiences into the light, in turn making them recognisable as having been obscured from the collective meaning. In what follows, I examine how women engage in hermeneutical resistance by challenging dominant interpretations of street harassment, thereby claiming interpretive authority, and reshaping the meaning of street harassment.

**Resistance through Naming**

As recognised by Fricker (2007), naming constitutes an important act in which marginalised knowers contribute to the understanding of obscured experiences. Coining the term *sexual harassment* allowed victims of sexual

harassment to make sense of their shared experiences, in turn opening up the possibility of legal redress.

The importance of naming street harassment has been noted by several scholars writing on the topic. Deirdre Davis (1994) stresses the importance of naming street harassment in legitimising its harm. Without a name, a harm risks going uncontested. Moreover, without a name with the right normative properties, street harassment risks being trivialised. For instance, terms like '*street remarks*' or '*hassling*' trivialise the harmful nature of street harassment (Laniya 2005). As such, naming helps reveal street harassment as a collective harm that can be placed in broader systems of gender oppression, in turn contributing to social and legal recognition (Fileborn 2014).

Before naming can be a proxy for recognition, it has to receive uptake in the broader speech community. In the last two decades, street harassment has received significant momentum. However, before this, the term *street harassment*, first formally used by Michaela di Leonardo in 1981, remained largely confined to academic and activist discourse with limited circulation beyond those spheres (Kearl 2015). As such, while the term *street harassment* existed, it was not readily available in the broader epistemic framework. Therefore, many victims of street harassment lacked access to the term for articulating their experiences.

It is important to note that while naming a harm can indeed be an important proxy for social recognition, the absence of an established term does not wholly keep those affected from understanding their experience (Mason 2011). While Fricker has argued that hermeneutical injustice undermines the marginalised knower in understanding her own experiences, others have challenged this view, suggesting that the primary harm lies instead in not being able to make her understandings intelligible to dominant knowers (e.g. Mason 2011; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2012). This self-understanding of the marginalised knower is crucial to acknowledge, as it forms the basis for the acts of hermeneutical resistance discussed below.

As such, even when dominant interpretative resources do not facilitate the interpretation of street harassment as harmful, women have long been trying to make this meaning intelligible. This is underscored by the many acts of protest against street harassment that happened long before di Leonardo coined the term. For instance, in the United States, the 'anti-flirt club' was active in Washington D.C, around 1920, and in 1970, women working on Wall Street staged the 'Wall Street Ogle-In', where they directed sexualized comments at men as a means of protest (Kearl 2015).

“Theorising misogynoir is an important act of hermeneutical resistance that provides a concept for violence on the intersection of race and gender.”

The uptake of the term street harassment by scholars, activists and organisations suggests that there is at least some acceptance of the term *street harassment* as a common interpretative resource. This growing recognition of street harassment is, in part, due to the many women who have shared their experiences on platforms such as Right To Be and Stop Street Harassment. 3 While this uptake can rightly be perceived as an important step in protesting street harassment, part of the ongoing struggle for meaning is not just developing new terms but also demanding the recognition of interpretations that lie outside of the dominant narrative. In the next section, I argue that the single-axis interpretation of street harassment as a gendered harm obscures how race impacts street harassment.

**Street Harassment as a Racialised Harm**

While street harassment affects women of all demographics, discussions on this topic often centre around white women as the victims of harassment (Johnson 2019). For instance, media reportages often frame victims of street harassment as "*attractive, young, white, straight women in big cities who wear high heels and short skirts"* (Kearl 2015, 18). This framing is not limited to mainstream media reportage. The street harassment awareness video *10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman* which aired in collaboration with Hollaback! in 2014, shows a white woman being harassed almost exclusively by men of colour. This framing feeds into pervasive stereotypes about race and sexual violence by perpetuating the stereotype that men of colour prey on white women. This exemplifies how whiteness is centred as the point of reference in anti-street harassment narratives.

Relying on a solely gendered interpretation of street harassment disregards the impact of race on lived experiences of street harassment. It obscures the fact that for many women, street harassment manifests as both a gendered and a racialised harm. Women of colour are sexualized along both their racial and their gender identity, realising persistent stereotypes about sexual availability that underly violence towards women of colour (Fogg-Davis 2006; Clark 2024). For instance, the Jezebel stereotype forms an archetype that portrays Black women as promiscuous, immoral, and manipulative. This archetype, as well as spin-offs such as 'hood rat' or 'hoochie mama', promote a hypersexualised image heavily rooted in the colonial objectification and othering of Black women (Coley 2024).

These stereotypes realise that street harassment may occur as a racialised harm in ways implicit (e.g. when sexualized racist stereotypes shape a harasser's perception of women of colour), or explicit (e.g. when sexualized racist slurs are uttered). Moya Bailey (2021) coined the term *misogynoir*

in 2008 to refer to the particular violence on the intersection of sexism and anti-Black racism. As Bailey argues, misogynoir combines anti-Black racism with sexism to devalue Black women along both their racial and their gender identity. Misogynoir, particularly in a United States context, manifests in various ways, including stereotypical representations in the media, demonisation in welfare campaigns, and a structural vulnerability to healthcare abuse (Bailey 2021). Theorising misogynoir is an important act of hermeneutical resistance that provides a concept for violence on the intersection of race and gender.

As in the cases described by Bailey, harassers target women of colour because of their combined racial and gender identity. However, the dominant interpretation of street harassment as a gendered harm does not reflect this meaning. This continues to shape the understanding of street harassment along hegemonic systems of meaning, which neglect the impact of race and the theorisation of intersectional violence by women of colour. In the next section, I take the Twitter-based YouOkSis movement as an example of how women of colour challenge this narrative.

**#YouOkSis as Hermeneutical Resistance**

The aftermath of Feminista Jones' viral 2014 tweet about street harassment offers a compelling case of hermeneutical resistance in practice. While witnessing a man harassing a Black woman on the street in New York, Jones intervened by asking the woman if she was okay. After sharing this moment on Twitter, the hashtag *YouOkSis* received significant uptake. What initially started as a conversation between Jones and her followers soon grew into an online movement where women theorised street harassment on the intersection of race and gender. For instance, Jones tweeted "A natl study on SH barely involved urban BW. It did not reflect OUR experiences & conflicts with cultural affinity and police. #YouOkSis?" (Feminista Jones 2014, cited in Rentschler 2017). Additionally, @TheTrudz, who played a crucial role in amplifying the movement, tweeted "When others harass me as a BW, it's anti-Blackness/misogynoir. Non-Black communities have to face their own misogyny as well. #YouOkSis?" (TheTrudz 2014, cited in Rentschler 2017).

Importantly, #YouOkSis transcended the single-axis focus of the dominant anti-street harassment narrative by fostering an online space for the retelling of street harassment that centres the voices of women of colour. In doing so, it enabled a collective narrating practice of resistance in which the meaning of street harassment was renegotiated to include the impact of race. By theorising street harassment on the intersection of race

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and gender, #YouOkSis revealed the interpretative bias embedded in the dominant anti-street harassment narrative that obscures the fact that street harassment is racialised, as well as gendered. As such, by engaging in collective online discussion, women participating in the YouOkSis movement challenged the hegemonic interpretation of street harassment, which perpetuates an understanding of the world rooted in whiteness.

In addition to renegotiating meaning through discussion, #YouOkSis provides a hermeneutical tool to articulate street harassment as impacted by race. Hashtags can be a way of performing speech acts without having to rely on dominant meanings that are attached to existing conceptual resources. This may foster uptake of marginalised meanings, akin to how metaphors may contribute to hermeneutical resistance by articulating meaning without having to engage in the full linguistic articulation of that meaning (Ney 2024).

In turn, hashtags constitute a way of meaning-sharing that goes beyond existing conceptual resources. An example that has shown this in global magnitude is the MeToo movement. MeToo, initiated by Tarana Burke, has been used to protest sexual harassment in response to the viral uptake of #MeToo. Where this hashtag initially underscored testimonies of victims of sexual harassment, the hashtag has arguably become an interpretive resource in and of itself. When proclaiming 'MeToo', an interlocutor shows solidarity with other victims while also sharing in a broader narrative of surviving and protesting sexual harassment. This way, the hashtag has become a 'narrative signifier', which symbolises the total of individual testimonies of victims of sexual harassment (Dawson 2020).

#MeToo illustrates that hashtags can constitute acts of hermeneutical resistance by providing people with a conceptual resource for expressing marginalised experiences. While not enjoying the global uptake of #MeToo, #YouOkSis offers a hermeneutical tool that women of colour can build their narratives about street harassment with. This also applies to offline contexts where #YouOkSis offers a script for bystanders to intervene in street harassment, as exemplified by this tweet *"Shout out to the chick and two dudes who #YouOKSis'd me tonight when a dude wouldn't leave me alone downtown ATL tonight"*(@Dammit_Woman 2017, cited in Johnson 2019).

In this sense, online narrating practices such as #YouOkSis challenge dominant epistemic frameworks by creating space to shape and share discussions with marginalised meanings. This creates friction, which exposes limitations in the dominant interpretations of street harassment. As such, #YouOkSis constitutes a speech act that protests both street harassment in the public space and the white-centred framework through which that experience is dominantly interpreted.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have explored women's hermeneutical resistance against street harassment. Street harassment is a harm regularly occurring in urban environments, which constitutes a mechanism through which power over the public sphere is asserted. Despite being a serious harm, street harassment often remains understood through hegemonic systems of meaning that support patriarchal interpretations. Even when trivialization and victim-blaming are fought, for instance by anti-street harassment campaigns, the dominant interpretation of street harassment as a gender-based harm obscures how other identity axis impact street harassment. A purely gender-based interpretation neglects the structural impact of racism on violence against women of colour. Throughout this essay, I have highlighted several acts of hermeneutical resistance in which women shape, reinterpret and share meanings of street harassment. In doing so, women protest both street harassment as a harm impacting urban life and the hegemonic frameworks through which that harm is interpreted. In particular, I have highlighted the YouOkSis movement as an act of hermeneutical resistance in which women of colour engaged in an online collective narrating practice to reshape the meaning of street harassment to include experiences on the intersection of race and gender. This resistance is crucial, as it challenges dominant interpretations that obscure street harassment and its normative properties. By resisting hegemonic interpretations, women protest how street harassment is understood and legitimised and, in doing so, reclaim their right to the public space.

“‘Shout out to the chick and two dudes who #YouOKSis’d me tonight when a dude wouldn’t leave me alone downtown ATL tonight’ (@Dammit_Woman 2017, cited in Johnson 2019).”

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**Endnotes**

1 For instance, see the work of Stop Street Harassment, Right To Be (formerly Hollaback!) and HarassMap.

2 Since the topic of this essay is hermeneutical resistance, I will bypass the concept of testimonial injustice in this discussion, which happens when a speaker is not given warranted credibility due to a hearer’s identity prejudice (Fricker 2007). This does not mean that testimonial injustice does not occur in the context of street harassment, for instance, see Bacharach 2018.

3 Hollaback! had city-specific platforms based in 84 western cities before its centralisation in 2022, including Hollaback! Amsterdam, Hollaback! Melbourne, Hollaback! London and Hollaback! Berlin. These sites allowed victims of street harassment to share city-specific testimonies of street harassment. Currently existing alternatives on the level of the city include StreetSafe (London) and Safer for Girls (Barcelona, Madrid & Seville).